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People face burden and hard choices

By Virginia T. Lodge

Not coincidentally, the day I was asked to write this column, the front page of *The New York Times* spelled out the grim reality for the nation's low-income and even moderate-income individuals and families.

"In Sour Economy, Some Scale Back on Medications," it read. It could just as well have stated, "In Sour Economy, Many Scale Back on the Thermostat."

As the weather turns cooler, many of us are already starting to kick up our thermostats. But thousands of our friends and neighbors can't do that because they can't afford to pay their ever-increasing utility bills. Nashville Electric Service recently announced a 5.5 percent rate increase beginning Nov. 1.

The Tennessee Valley Authority has already implemented a 20 percent rate increase. Now, more than ever, people in need are turning to the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program for help.

LIHEAP assists people in poverty with their heating and cooling bills. It is 100 percent federally funded through a grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. To be eligible, applicants' incomes must be at or below 125 percent of the federal poverty level. That's about \$26,500 for a family of four. Priority is given to the elderly, individuals with disabilities and families with young children.

Applications are up

Applications to participate in LIHEAP are up 40 percent over the same period last year — in the first three months of this year, more than 42,000 people have applied for help.

There is always greater need than available dollars, and LIHEAP funds are usually depleted within months of their allocation.

Nonetheless, Gov. Phil Bredesen and the state Department of Human Services are committed to doing all we can to help families who are struggling to pay energy bills. During the difficult 2005-2006 winter, Bredesen responded to the dire need for more energy assistance with his Warm Homes Initiative that included a \$5 million infusion of one-time state dollars to the program.

He also stepped up during the 2007 heat wave, creating a cooling assistance program for families and individuals who were LIHEAP eligible but could not be served. DHS is constantly exploring ways to make our available LIHEAP dollars stretch further.

A trip to Washington

This year, our state's LIHEAP director was invited to Washington, D.C., to testify before a subcommittee of the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions. Our director and others advocated for a larger investment in this program but also pointed out the need for a more

equitable formula to distribute the funds to warm-weather states such as Tennessee.

And it worked. Like an early Christmas gift, that additional funding has appeared. The recently passed federal "Economic Bailout" included \$50.1 billion for the LIHEAP program. Tennessee's share is \$80 million. This is nearly triple the amount of LIHEAP funds we normally receive.

DHS is very excited at this opportunity to serve thousands more Tennesseans during the fast approaching cold winter months and the increasingly warm summer ones.
